

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Afghan Data Breach and Resettlement Schemes, HC 1304

Tuesday 9 December 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 December 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Lincoln Jopp; Emma Lewell; Ian Roome; Michelle Scrogham; and Fred Thomas.

Questions 164 to 225

Witnesses

Rafi Hottak, former Afghan interpreter, Professor Sara de Jong, University of York , and David Williams, journalist at the *Daily Mail*.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[ADBRS0010 - Prof Victoria Canning \(Global Lead for Social Sciences at Lancaster University\); Olivia Clark \(Executive Director at Refugee Legal Support\); Prof Sara de Jong \(Professor at University of York\); Shamim Sharabi \(Community Engagement and Research Lead at Refugee Legal Support\); Isaac Shaffer \(Legal Director at Refugee Legal Support\)](#)

[ADBRS0017 - Sulha Alliance](#)

[ADBRS0021 – Rafi Hottak](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rafi Hottak, Professor de Jong and David Williams.

Q164 **Chair:** Welcome to this House of Commons Defence Committee evidence session on our inquiry into the Afghan data breach and resettlement schemes. It is a pleasure to have with us Rafi Hottak, a former interpreter; Professor Sara de Jong, a professor of politics and international relations at the University of York; and David Williams, an award-winning journalist at the *Daily Mail* and one of the people behind the Betrayal of the Brave campaign. Rafi and Sara, you have given evidence to the Committee before, but could all three of you introduce yourselves for the record?

Rafi Hottak: Hi, my name is Rafi Hottak. I am a former interpreter for the British forces in Afghanistan. I was injured on the frontline. Since 2011, I have been living here in the UK. I have led the campaign to save the Afghan interpreters since 2011. In 2021, the collapse happened. The ARAP and other schemes have been involved in the background trying to help our Afghan allies.

Professor de Jong: I am a professor of politics and international relations at the University of York. Since 2017-18 I have been researching the protection and rights of Afghan interpreters across the world, not just those who supported the British Army.

The only other important thing to mention is that I am a co-founder and chair of the board of trustees of the Sulha Alliance, which is a charity that supports and advocates for Afghan interpreters. Beyond my academic expertise in this area, I do a lot of day-to-day casework and I am in contact with Afghan interpreters on a daily basis.

David Williams: Good morning. I am David Williams. I was chief reporter at the *Daily Mail* for 29 years. I am also a trustee at the Sulha Alliance, and for the last decade I have run the Betrayal of the Brave campaign for the *Mail*, which highlights the cases of interpreters who have been left behind.

Q165 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that. As I said, it is a pleasure to have all three of you here. Over the next couple of hours, Members will have a variety of questions for you to get things on the record. I will kick-start proceedings. To set the scene, can each of you highlight how you became aware of the data breach? Within that response, can you advise whether you were served with the super-injunction?

David Williams: I heard about it through a former Afghan interpreter. There were messages coming out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. I was sent a copy of the message.¹ I then spent two days trying to see the breadth of

¹ Note from witness: The message effectively warned Afghans who had worked for the UK that their data might have been compromised.

the leak and substantiate it. I subsequently put what I had discovered to the Ministry of Defence—I think we will probably get to that later. I was not personally served, but the *Daily Mail* was served.

Professor de Jong: I became aware of it in August 2023, and I was not served a notice.

Rafi Hottak: Yes, it was August '23 when I became aware of it. I received a message, and I shared it with two of my trusted people to look into it. I was not served with any super-injunction.

Q166 **Lincoln Jopp:** Mr Williams, as I understand it, you are the first journalist who got this story, and you tried to stand it up with the MoD.

David Williams: Yes.

Q167 **Lincoln Jopp:** First, how did you feel about having this potentially explosive story?

David Williams: I knew that it was a very important story. I was worried for the people in Afghanistan in particular. I spent 24 hours trying to get second and third parties to confirm it. I then put it to the press office at the MoD.² I was called back by a senior press officer who told me that they had been in meetings about it during the day and that they would come back to me with a statement. They came back later that day with a statement where they effectively confirmed the details that I had put to them, which included the fact that more than 30,000 people had been compromised. While they could not stop us using it, they requested us to please bear in mind that the lives of Afghans had been potentially compromised.

At that time, they described it as malicious, and I understood that they had not identified the source of it. I spoke to the editors, and we agreed not to use the story because we would potentially jeopardise the lives. Obviously, the *Mail* had been campaigning for many years, and I had been to Afghanistan many times, so we were not going to jeopardise those we wanted to help. Subsequently, the MoD was in touch with me on a very regular basis.

I then heard from the D-notice committee, and I had discussions with the D-notice people over the next four days. During those, we discussed whether a D-notice would be appropriate. I suggested that it might not be appropriate in these circumstances because of the fact that it was in a third country and involved foreign nationals, many of whom were in another country, so it would be hard to contain.

I also said that others were aware of it who were civilians, so it would be difficult for the journalist. If the journalist were gagged and we were not going to use the story anyway, then a D-notice might not be appropriate. We then came to an agreement that we would not use the story, but if any

² Note from witness: I was asked to put my questions in writing which I did. They were detailed and specific.

other journalists asked about it, I would be told, and the editors could make a decision.

Q168 **Lincoln Jopp:** So there was self-censorship to begin with, given your history.

David Williams: Yes.

Q169 **Lincoln Jopp:** Clearly, like all good journalists, you are concerned about the Afghans down range, but you also do not want another journalist telling your story.

David Williams: Indeed.

Q170 **Lincoln Jopp:** Can you just explain the last little phrase you used—that the editors would decide? The way you describe it, this D-notice process sounds quite collaborative—it is by agreement. Can you dig into that a bit more?

David Williams: Initially, I was telephoned by one of those from the D-notice committee. I had a discussion with him, which lasted on and off over two days. He then went on holiday and it was picked up by another member of the committee. I made the argument to both of them that it would be difficult to contain with others knowing, and with the fact that they are in a third country and foreign nationals knew about it.

In all these instances, particularly with a story of this importance, the editors would be aware of it and, ultimately, they would have the decision on whether we published a story or not. In this instance, we all recognised there was a potential to endanger the lives of the Afghans, and I think it was quite an easy decision, albeit that, given it was a very important story, we also felt that the Afghans should be warned and had a right to know, and that the extent of the leak should be revealed. It was a balancing act, with the decision resting with the editor.

Q171 **Lincoln Jopp:** So that self-censorship went so far, but then was a D-notice issued?

David Williams: No. No D-notice was ever issued.

Q172 **Lincoln Jopp:** It was straight to the injunction and then the super-injunction.

David Williams: Straight to the injunction. About four days after the discussions about the D-notice, I was called by a senior press officer and told that an injunction was being discussed, that senior Ministers were involved and, I believe, that there was going to be a Cobra meeting. That was when the agreement was made that I would be alerted if other journalists asked about it and we agreed not to run.

Q173 **Lincoln Jopp:** In the early part of your answer, in respect of the way the MoD were talking about the leak, you said that they described it as “malicious”.

David Williams: Yes.

Q174 **Lincoln Jopp:** When did that change? And are you referring to the fact that the way in which the leaked material was being used was malicious, or that the leak was malicious ab initio?

David Williams: Our interpretation initially, given that we knew various agencies were involved in the investigation, was that the MoD had not at that stage identified where the leak had come from, and it was possible that a rogue state or others might have been involved in a hack or obtaining material, perhaps from Pakistan. That is what we interpreted "malicious" to mean.

Q175 **Lincoln Jopp:** When did conspiracy turn to cock-up in the way that the MoD were talking about the leak?

David Williams: Quite a while later, when we found out how the leak had taken place.

Chair: Let us move on to the impact of the secrecy on individuals.

Q176 **Michelle Scrogam:** Welcome. Do you believe that the super-injunction struck the right balance between transparency and protecting people? If not, what do you think should have been done differently?

David Williams: I thought that an injunction initially would have been sufficient. A super-injunction I understood, if the Afghans were told at that stage that their data had been compromised. I thought the idea of the super-injunction, and indeed the injunction, was to alert them of the potential dangers, while at the same time hunting out the source of the leak.³

Rafi Hottak: I believe that the super-injunction would have been more effective if the time period in which the Afghan allies were evacuated had been shorter and quicker. A second, secret line of communication should have been started with those people who had been affected, which was not set up, because they were unaware of what was happening.

There was a broad understanding that certain people were prioritised over others, without knowing what was happening. We were aware, but we could not talk about it because we did not want to cause any panic and cause more risk to people who are already in danger in Afghanistan. As David said, I think that the Afghans had the right to be aware of what was happening through a secure line of communication.

Professor de Jong: I completely agree. We all get emails from pension funds that lose our data. We know that we have a right to know when our data is compromised. My expectation was that that would be the priority, and that the safety of the people whose data was compromised would be the priority. The length of time of the super-injunction was surprising to all of us. We had not anticipated, in August 2023, that we would only see that lifted in July 2025.

³ Note from witness: And establishing if the Taliban had the leaked list.

David Williams: Initially, the indication was that it would only be for three to four months—that is what we were led to believe.

Q177 **Michelle Scrogam:** In your view, should the super-injunction have been lifted?

David Williams: I believe that while we remained very concerned about the Afghans, it was the right decision to lift it, and it should have been lifted earlier. I think the Afghans had an absolute right to know, and I think you, as parliamentarians, had an absolute right to know. When my colleague Sam Greenhill, who you have heard from, came back and told me that we were talking about sums of £7 billion⁴—without parliamentary scrutiny and the country knowing—I thought it was time to break glass and lift the injunction.

Professor de Jong: At the Sulha Alliance we have two WhatsApp groups for all the Afghan interpreters who are resettled in the UK. We have had that for a long time, and prior to 2021, so it includes ex gratia interpreters who were in the country longer. That is a peer support group where we, as the team at the Sulha Alliance, are available; and the interpreters can also give each other advice and guidance. Many of the people in the group were in the position that their data was compromised; I would say that the majority of the people in the group had their data compromised.

The typical response from people was outrage about how long it had taken to be informed, especially because once they were informed, the security advice they were asked to follow was something that they could not retrospectively do. If you are told to hide your social media profile and to only use a VPN from now on, of course it only makes you more concerned about what you should have done 22 months earlier. We got a lot of responses about how this was unacceptable—“They are only telling us now.”

As a representative of the Sulha Alliance, I am presenting that perspective, and as a researcher, together with Refugee Legal Support and Professor Victoria Canning, I have done a survey among people who have been affected. Again, the overwhelming majority of people who have been affected say, “We would have wanted to know this earlier, so that we could have taken our own measures.”

Rafi Hottak: In my statement I mentioned that it should have continued for as long as there were people at risk who should be saved. However, if the super-injunction was going to be lifted at an earlier point, there should have been a secret channel of communication for the Afghans. There should have been advice.

After speaking to many Afghans, particularly those allies who had already been evacuated here, they had families left behind, and if they had known about this through a secret channel, they could have taken precautions to

⁴ Note from witness: Sam Greenhill came back *from the secret High Court hearings* and told me we were talking about sums of £7 billion *as the potential cost of the leak*.

protect the most vulnerable. From there, they could have found safety in a third country: Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan or elsewhere. However, that secret, safe line of communication was never established. That is why I initially felt that the injunction should be kept for as long anybody was at risk and until they were evacuated.

Q178 **Emma Lewell:** David, you said that parliamentarians had a right to know. Do you think any of the parliamentarians that knew should have used parliamentary privilege to let Parliament know what was going on?

David Williams: I do not, no.

Q179 **Emma Lewell:** Why is that?

David Williams: Because I think the terms of the super-injunction were such that it would have been wrong, when we were all being gagged, for the parliamentary process to have been used to reveal it. What should have happened was that the MoD should have told people such as the Chairmen of the Committees and others and briefed them accordingly.

Emma Lewell: That is really helpful, thank you.

Chair: I noted in your evidence that the *Mail* agreed not to publish because of the risk to those involved. That is commendable.

Q180 **Fred Thomas:** Mr Hottak, you just spoke about some of the UK Government's shortcomings in communicating with those potentially affected by the data breach even when the injunction was lifted. You spoke about having a network of people who worked as interpreters and have now come across to the UK.

What could, or should, UK Government have done to try to keep people who are still in Afghanistan now, and have not made it to Pakistan, the UK or anywhere else, safe during this process, balanced against the security risk and why we wanted to have the injunction?

Rafi Hottak: It is across the board with the interpreters, the Triples, the NDS and other Afghan allies who are either approved, rejected or still waiting to hear about their ARAP applications in Afghanistan. They are left on their own. They do not have any such protection in Afghanistan. If anything happens to them—if they are arrested, tortured or in some instances killed or disappeared—the UK Government do not take any responsibility. Those who have been approved have been waiting in Afghanistan for almost two years now. There are high-profile cases and then everybody else.

Q181 **Fred Thomas:** People who have been approved are still waiting?

Rafi Hottak: Yes, in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

Q182 **Fred Thomas:** What reason are they being given for that when they ask why?

Rafi Hottak: I do not know exactly. It could be anything—it could be political or about Pakistan.

Q183 **Fred Thomas:** What is the reason they are given? Is any reason offered?

Rafi Hottak: No. In those communications, no specific reason is given. Limited communication is kept once the approval is given, then subsequently they have been asked to provide their documentation, and so on and so forth. But they are never given any specific reason why they cannot be moved today to Pakistan, Iran or any other third country.

Q184 **Fred Thomas:** You alluded a second ago to people who have been turned down. Are there people who fought with British forces currently in Afghanistan who have been turned down for resettlement here?

Rafi Hottak: Yes. There are a number of people.

Q185 **Fred Thomas:** Are they from any particular units, or is there a wide array of jobs?

Rafi Hottak: I do not know if it is right for me to mention the name of the units, but presumably everybody knows the Triples. There are different units of Triples. The majority of them are still in Afghanistan. Some are in third countries and face deportation and risk in those third countries. Many of them who have been approved are still in Afghanistan. There are quite a few here in the UK.

David Williams: It is a fact that since break glass and the lifting of the super injunction, and indeed before it, no Afghans have been offered assistance by the third-party organisation. That is virtually six months that Afghans have not been given assistance and advice to leave the country.

Our understanding is that more than 2,000 approved cases are waiting to move, but are not being moved. Several of them have received emails, which we have been sent, from the MoD, advising them specifically not to move and to wait for contact from the third party organisation. It was at the end of June that the last people were moved, we understand from the people in country—the interpreters and so on. But nobody has been moved officially with the assistance of the organisation since. Before that, after Pitting, more than 11,000 were successfully moved with their help and guidance.⁵

Q186 **Fred Thomas:** Why do you think there has been this pause?

David Williams: We don't know. It could be the difficulties with Pakistan not wanting to be a lily pad and a launch for the transit, because of the time it has taken to keep people in country. It could be diplomatic, or it could be legal. We simply do not know. But none of the Afghans are being told why, and none of the Afghans have been told when they will move. Indeed, they are being told, "Please be patient. We will advise you, but we cannot give you any further update."

⁵ Note from witness: Since Pitting over 11,000 have been moved successfully with help and guidance, but this stopped with the lifting of the superinjunction. Why? Some 100 have self-moved without help in Afghanistan and they are assisted as usual on arrival in Pakistan by the British High Commission. Thousands more are waiting to hear if their cases are approved. This delay in movement impacts them too.

Professor de Jong: During the same period, there were also people who had been moved to Pakistan but were still not being moved to the UK. The way it works is that normally you get a visa to come to Pakistan for three or six months, so if you hold people in a hotel in Islamabad for more than that period, these people become illegalised in the eyes of the Pakistan Government, which is why we have seen the raids on the hotels—some of them have been quite well documented in the media. It is really important that we sketch this picture of those who are here and those who are still over there.

As Rafi knows, many interpreters applied for additional family members to join them—brothers or fathers who are attacked and receive threats because the principal applicant has left the country, but the Taliban has moved the threats to the family members. That is also a whole group of people who have been waiting to hear. Those are the people who Rafi alluded to. They are in the UK and they received a message that their data had been breached and are extremely concerned about their family members. Many of them sent in an AFM application two or three years ago for additional family members to join them and have still not heard anything, or have just received a negative decision.

Rafi Hottak: I would like to add the recklessness or no support provided to those allies, particularly in the third countries like Pakistan. There have been cases where those interpreters or allies have been deported from Pakistan; they have been arrested and kept in deportation centres and deported back to Afghanistan, and the UK Government have not taken any action. There were pregnant women and children among them. Those principal applicants were people who were at real risk, but the UK Government have failed to provide any kind of protection.

Q187 **Fred Thomas:** Were they people who the UK Government had told, "You should move to Pakistan with a third party?"

Rafi Hottak: Yes.

Q188 **Fred Thomas:** They then got arrested in Pakistan and deported back to Afghanistan.

Professor de Jong: Exactly.

Q189 **Fred Thomas:** And the UK Government knew about it and have not taken action.

David Williams: Yes.

Rafi Hottak: There are cases of interpreters, Triples and others, who have been in the hotels for 18 months or two years, or even longer.

Professor de Jong: These are British high commission paid-for hotels, so they have been accepted and moved into those hotels on the understanding that they will then be moved to the UK.

Rafi Hottak: They are waiting for approval to be brought here to the UK. Their ARAP application has been accepted. They have been legally moved

to Pakistan, and they were living in the British high commission provided accommodation, and suddenly the situation in Pakistan dictated that the Pakistani Government have started arresting them and deporting them to Afghanistan.

Q190 **Fred Thomas:** What happens to them when they get to Afghanistan?

Rafi Hottak: Literally, they are left on their own.

Professor de Jong: These are people who have sold their houses and their cars because they were accepted under ARAP.

Q191 **Fred Thomas:** What kind of numbers are we talking about?

Rafi Hottak: The very recent case that we highlighted in the media was of six interpreters and a number of Triples. There are a couple of hundred who are already in Afghanistan.

David Williams: I think Person A gave you a case of someone who was deported—a Triple who has suffered dreadfully. That case is ongoing and I know for a fact that yesterday, he was told that the place where he was sheltering he could no longer shelter.

Q192 **Lincoln Jopp:** All three of you maintain very active networks in Afghanistan. We know the reason that the Government stated for lifting the super-injunction. What is the perception in Afghanistan as to the reason why the Government lifted it?

Rafi Hottak: For them, why it was lifted is less of a concern; it's more a concern about why we were not aware in the first place. My data was leaked, so I should be aware to take my precautions.

I will divide the Afghan community into two categories: people who are already evacuated to the UK and their families, who are at risk there. Their family homes were searched multiple times; arrests were made by the Taliban; there were situations where money was taken or people were asked to pay for X number of weapons; there was torture in some cases. Those families and the applicants who are already here are like, "If our details were compromised, we should have been aware so that if the UK Government were not supporting us, we could have done something about it and helped the most vulnerable."

Q193 **Lincoln Jopp:** I do not want to cut you off, but on that one specific question you say that why the Government lifted the super-injunction is not an issue in Afghanistan. Do either of the other two panellists have any views on that perception?

David Williams: The feeling is a sense of anger and disbelief at why we were not told earlier. Specifically in answer to your question, there has not really been feedback from them about the timing and why.

Q194 **Mr Bailey:** First, thank you, David and the *Daily Mail*, for the way that you have handled this for Afghan veterans. You have done so with great dignity and have provided a service that has been lacking elsewhere. Ultimately, this is a failure of Government.

I want to continue on the line that Mr Thomas was going down, because there is more to come there, I think. Without stealing the sandwiches from the rest of the questions that will follow, I want to press on the Triples aspect. Is there is a perception that the Triples are disproportionately affected? Every single one of the examples that Fred gave, and all the really troubling examples that we are hearing, impact the Triples. Why? Is that a perception that you hold, Rafi?

Rafi Hottak: I was a member of Commando Force 333. I can understand their background very well and I think that I can speak on their behalf. Yes, there was anger because they were, as you guys might be aware, the most elite units that we trained in Afghanistan, getting out all the very sensitive operation before us. Suddenly, the collapse happens, the super-injunction is there—at a later point—and, at the evacuation, initially the Triples were not part of the evacuation group. They were not part of the ARAP; they were added later on. That was a betrayal that they felt initially: why were they not part of the ARAP from day one?

Once the super-injunction happened and it was then lifted, as David said there is an anger among the Triples that our data was leaked, it was a betrayal of our trust. You left us at the mercy of the Taliban; that is one thing. You then subsequently leak our data to the Taliban; now we are being hunted.

There are cases where Triples soldiers and officers have been killed, for no reason—they have brought them out in front of their doorsteps and shot them in the head. They do feel betrayed, and they feel that the evacuation should have included them from day one. Particularly when the data was leaked, they should have been prioritised and evacuated as soon as possible.

Professor de Jong: The timeline that Rafi sketches is really important. When ARAP was introduced, even prior to Op Pitting, it was primarily written with the interpreters in mind. You can see that a larger cohort of the interpreters are already in the UK.

There are also interpreters who are still in Afghanistan and they are very badly affected as well. Even among the survey data⁶ that we have collected you can see in our respondents that among those affected, the people who respond from inside the UK tend to be interpreters, and those outside, and still in Afghanistan, tend to be Triples. That is just because they got moved because of the Triple review, which was only done after a campaign highlighted their plight.

At the same time, some of the Rimmer report does not sufficiently differentiate between the different ways that different cohorts were affected. Rimmer puts the emphasis on the fact that the Taliban would already have had the data from the previous Afghan Government. But

⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/149931/pdf/> (Refugee Legal Support, Professor Victoria Canning, Professor Sara de Jong)

when you look at interpreters and other locally employed civilians who worked for the British Army—drivers, mechanics and so on—that was not data held by the Afghan Government. Rimmer’s observation that the Taliban would have had that anyway, because they would have inherited it from the Afghan Government, is completely irrelevant when it comes to those people.

While many interpreters have been relocated, when it comes to locally employed civilians, who also performed essential roles and were often recruited from local areas—as you personally know, Mr Bailey—they are also at risk. Those people have mostly received rejections, and we do not see them being moved as part of the ARR either.

David Williams: We have an instance where 18 people who worked for the RAF were brought out at the time of Pitting. Another nine were called forward but could not get to the airport. They were subsequently told that they would be brought under ARAP. However, when they applied for ARAP, they were rejected. They then applied for ACRS and were rejected. They are still in country and in hiding. That included the supervisor of their team, who is in regular contact with his other 18 and family who are in the UK.

To return to the Triples, when they read reports from this country that a number of their applications had been blocked, there was disbelief and outrage. One of those who we are in touch with had helped carry the body of a dead British special forces soldier down a hill beside his unit. He was still waiting for approval. He fled to Iran and was then deported from Iran. He is now being held in a Taliban prison and facing charges of working for the enemy.

Q195 **Mr Bailey:** Who should the Committee have in front of us to answer for why that differential treatment manifests?

David Williams: I would think obviously the Defence Secretaries past and present, but also those within ARAP who were party to those decisions.

Professor de Jong: The DARR team as well. In terms of the triaging happening now under ARR, I know the guidelines have been published, but it is still very unclear how a decision has been made that 900 and another 600 are going to come. That is 1,500 people plus their family members when the data of 18,600⁷ people was leaked. We know that some of them have subsequently been approved under ARAP as part of the Triple review, but who has fallen out of that?

Again, Rimmer himself recommends that we should hear more evidence from Afghans themselves. That is another really important point. Rimmer, for his own report, indicates that he spoke to Triples, but he did not speak to the wider Afghan community about how they have been affected, including those who worked as locally employed civilians for the British Army.

⁷ Note from witness: The correct figure is 18,700.

Mr Bailey: As you will know, Rafi, those were our most trusted soldiers. They are people that I worked alongside, and I would have flown with many times. Thank you.

Q196 **Emma Lewell:** In relation to what Calvin said about who the Committee should have before it, apart from our Chair, I am one of the few MPs who was here at the time of the fall of Afghanistan. Me and my team were desperately trying to help people get out of Afghanistan. I had constituents who had family members there. It was utter chaos at the Government end, and we were getting passed between the Home Office, the MoD and the FCDO and getting blanket emails saying "Wait, wait, wait". That went on for absolutely ages. Should we have the FCDO and the Home Office before the Committee as well?

David Williams: Yes, quite simply.

Rafi Hottak: I believe that in the initial days, the FCDO put out a phone number that people, particularly those who were in the UK, could contact and register the case of a family member in Afghanistan. But no response was given back to people, and it was very difficult to get hold of them—in most cases, it was answered by a machine. The FCDO should be held accountable for it.

Professor de Jong: Also, when you think about questions about the costs, I think there are some costs that we would probably find are justified when it comes to saving the lives of people, and there are other costs that seem to be rather unnecessary when it comes to letting people wait in Pakistan for a very long time. Of course, if it means that you have to also purchase exit visas—because people's visas have run out—to get them out of Pakistan, that seems to be a waste. It would be interesting to see what the costs are of that delay, and of the one that David indicated, where people are now left without any communication, and they have an approval but have not been moved.

Q197 **Chair:** All three of you have been very critical of the Government's communications. I know, Mr Williams, that within the journalists' submission, there was an expression of the anger that was felt by many. Mr Hottak, I also noted that in your written evidence you said that when the court injunction was lifted, panic spread within the community and individuals were selling up everything to flee Afghanistan, and, as they fled, some of them were deported back and others were intercepted, detained and so forth. There was a lot going on there.

There is also the feeling among many, including yourself, that you may never be able to return safely back to Afghanistan as long as the Taliban are in charge. What has been the practical impact on the Afghans who have been impacted by the data breach, both in terms of the risk to their lives and their mental health and wellbeing?

Rafi Hottak: I think that the impact in that kind of conservative society involved not just the Taliban, but the wider community. The Afghans who provided their personal data to the UK Government in many cases did not even have close family members who were aware of what sort of job they

were doing. Suddenly, that was leaked, and many people became aware of it. First, it caused a kind of distrust, even among the community, and secondly, they felt embarrassed about the service they provided to the UK Government and how they were treated.

There was the risk side as well. Many of them have been arrested, searched and the Taliban have taken them. The community elders were involved, and, in many cases, money was paid to the Taliban to release them, and guarantees were given that they would not talk about anything. There are situations where the Taliban have killed members of the same community and taken guarantees from the family that they will not speak to anybody about what has happened—"Take your body, and close the case. If you find out, the rest of the family will face the same fate."

Professor de Jong: It is important to say that the panic that was induced is because the actual risk increased, or people understood the risk that they may have already experienced for some years. Secondly, it was the communication. I do not know if you have done the self-checker and looked at the communication, but there is literally a red message that says, "Your data has been compromised and likely also the data of your family members."

There is no way that people can get any information on exactly what data was compromised. Many people ask, "Do they know my family's address? What exactly do they know?" If you apply for additional family members to come to the UK, you are asked very specific questions such as, "Where have you lived in the last five years?" and "Did you live with your family or not?" Of course, the question going through people's heads was, "Is that data compromised?" As there was no helpline or anything to phone, and no way to find out what exact information was leaked, it created only more panic. It was astonishing that the MoD had 22 months to think about this communication, and that was the best that they could come up with.

The fallout was something that Rafi, David and others dealt with, as did I. We are the ones who managed the panic in those WhatsApp groups. We are the ones who got panicked messages from individuals wondering what is happening to their family.

In a survey that we did with Refugee Legal Support and Professor Canning, 89%, 207 people out of the 231 who got a letter from the MoD saying that their data had been breached reported very serious mental health issues, such as panic attacks and lying awake at night. That includes those still in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as those in the UK, saying, "I thought I was safe, but now I get phone calls every day from my family members." Their families were asking the questions that Rafi just listed, such as, "What have you done to us?" and "Can you guarantee our safety?" These people feel particularly bad because they do not have any answers for their family members or others, as the MoD did not give them any answers apart from, "Take your Facebook account down." There was no other support.

Even in the past, there used to be an intimidation unit. It was not working very well, and I have been speaking to the Committee and Rafi about how badly that worked, but at least there was something like an intimidation unit that you could phone. It was astonishing that there was no service set up at all to support those who may have wanted to voice their concerns. That also means that there was no data gathering. Asking Afghans themselves, "How do you think this impacted you and your family?" would have greatly complemented the Rimmer report, as Rimmer himself indicates in his recommendations.

Q198 Chair: I fully note that the MoD self-checker merely advised somebody who had been impacted without going into any specific details. If somebody had just received one line saying, "You have been impacted", that would cause, as you rightly said, tension and stress for that person.

When you mentioned intimidation, do you mean the information services centre? It was promised by the Secretary of State but never delivered. That failed to materialise, and it left Afghans without any staffed helpline, so they could not speak to anybody about how and where they could get help. Could you highlight that, please?

Professor de Jong: Prior to 2021—when Rafi, for instance, initially was trying to seek sanctuary in the UK—when there was an ex-gratia scheme for interpreters, there was also an intimidation scheme. Interpreters who had received threats could phone that intimidation unit and they would be interviewed there. It was not working very well, because hardly anybody got resettled, but at least prior to 2021, something like an intimidation unit was set up where people could report risk to life.

Indeed, I have been as surprised as you about the fact that although this information services centre has been announced, we have not tangibly seen any kind of manifestation of that. People did not get anything but that email with the self-checker, and then the very limited security advice that I alluded to.

As Rafi knows, these people are used to working in high-security settings, so to get security advice that is pretty mundane and does not feel tailor-made and is not realistic, because you cannot go back in time and apply the security advice retrospectively, that does not feel like you take concerns very seriously. Have you asked what has happened with the information services centre?

Q199 Chair: That is something else—if promises are made, they should be kept. Mr Williams, what are your views on how individuals have been impacted? Could you also talk about the promises that were made regarding the information services centre and the other things that did not materialise? How did that impact individuals' mental wellbeing?

David Williams: Between us we received literally thousands of calls asking, "What does this mean?" They asked, "Are we now more at risk?" and "Are we going to be rescued?" There was absolutely no information coming to them from the areas they thought it should be coming from. They were looking to us for answers, which we obviously couldn't provide.

Those in this country who we had helped previously—interpreters and others—were desperate for information. They reported to us the mental anguish that they were going through and the anguish that those in country were going through, because obviously there had been a lot of publicity in Afghanistan over it, including the suggestion that the Taliban had the list. We knew that, at that time, retribution and extrajudicial killings had been stepped up.

Q200 **Chair:** Mr Hottak, you describe in your written evidence how the breach is actually a betrayal of trust, but how confident can you be that there are people who have suffered reprisals directly as a result of the information in the breach, and that these reprisals would not have occurred regardless?

Rafi Hottak: The Rimmer report also underplays the risk for the Afghans. I cannot specifically prove to you 100% that the data breach did affect their life, but I can present cases where, as David rightly said, thousands of calls were made to us and there was panic and fear among the Afghan community.

One of our interpreters, who is already here in the UK, has a mum and three sisters left behind. He made an AFM application. As soon as he became aware what happened, he was like, "Okay, there are cases where the Taliban has forcefully married the sisters and daughters of the former Government employees in certain cities. Does that mean my sisters will be taken by the Taliban or can you guys save them and evacuate them urgently, because my LSU number or the ARAP number is showing the red alert message. Does that mean that, on the next flight, my family will be out?" I did not have any answer for him.

There are cases where an interpreter was not aware of the data breach, but because of the risk that they felt, he moved his father, who was next in line in terms of risk, to Iran. They needed somebody to head the family, so their elder uncle was living in their home. A few days later, the Taliban raided their home and his uncle was killed.

There is an interpreter whose brother was also part of the Sandhurst academy in Afghanistan, the sister academy of the one in the UK. He was an officer there. This guy was picked up twice. The first time, he disappeared for three months. We have evidence that he was tortured and beaten. After paying money and involving the elders he was released and he fled to Iran, and then he was deported. Again, he was arrested for fleeing Afghanistan. Was his data breached? I don't know, but I do know that people have been specifically targeted.

There is a Triples soldier already here in Bristol. His brother, who was also part of the Triples, was killed for no reason apart from being a member of the Triples. Was that because of the data breach? I cannot prove it, but I can give you these specific examples of the cases where these people have been killed, tortured or arrested in the past four years.

The Rimmer report mentions that most of the data were already with the former Government. I do not believe that the Afghan Government had any

specific personal information on the allies who were not part of the Afghan Government directly. The details of the interpreters were with the British Government or with the NATO Government—whichever country they were working with. Until 2011, Triples were only the special units controlled, trained and funded by the UK Government. They had nothing to do with the Afghan Government, so the Afghan Government had very little control or awareness of what they were doing.

The Afghan Government had no data on other LECs working with the British Army, the embassy or other units. The Rimmer report says that the Afghan Government already had some information on them and the Taliban could have got that from the Afghan Government rather than the UK. I believe that is a false claim.

Q201 **Chair:** Mr Williams, given your various visits to Afghanistan, your detailed knowledge and the work undertaken by the *Mail*, how confident are you that people have suffered reprisals a direct result of the breach and would not have occurred otherwise?

David Williams: As Rafi says, it is impossible to say definitively. There are certainly people on the list who have been punished since, but I cannot say categorically that I am confident.⁸

Q202 **Chair:** There are no particular incidents that you can point to?

David Williams: There are incidents involving people who are on the list, but I do not know whether that is as a result of being on the list or whether they were being hunted previously. Person A mentioned the role of Yarmouk 60.

We know that there has been operational hunting of those who worked for Britain and the west for quite a long time. In recent times, they have been targeting the Triples. We know that there have been a number of instances, including the murder of the young family of a Triple who is in Germany where four children, a father and a wife were killed, including beheadings.

Q203 **Chair:** Professor de Jong, is there anything you would like to add about reprisals?

Professor de Jong: There are two things. First, the headlines that have been taken from the Rimmer report are very much, "We cannot be certain that it is simply the data breach that would have caused this risk." That is a very high bar of proof—as we said, this is not something that we can establish. But Rimmer also says very specifically in point 49 that "it is not possible to conclude decisively that those individuals affected by the data incident would not face any additional threat". Even having additional threats is meaningful. There are some examples in the Rimmer report where they say that if you have worked for NATO forces, it may have been known by other people already, but it may well not have been known. As

⁸ Note from witness: I cannot say categorically that I am confident *it is a result of the leak or being on the list*.

Rafi said, many people kept their profession a secret because it was already risky at the time.

Secondly, the super-injunction makes it even more impossible for us to establish this now. If a crime is committed and you give people the details of that crime only five years later, of course they will think back to what happened in their life and try to establish cause and effect, but it is almost impossible. This is the same. You cannot think about the evidence of whether there is an additional risk without thinking about the fact that people have been left in the dark, and therefore it will be even harder for them to know exactly what led to what.

Chair: We will now move on to questions pertaining to risk assessments and the decision to close the resettlement schemes.

Q204 **Emma Lewell:** At the granting of the injunction in 2023, there were individuals at risk of death. In late November 2024, the injunction was continued because secrecy was still needed to protect life. A few months later, the Rimmer review said that there was diminished risk to individuals. How do you think it got to that conclusion, and was it a fair conclusion?

David Williams: We are not sure how he got to that conclusion, given that we were hearing from the ground that it was extremely dangerous still, and that the number of killings, house searches and arrests had increased. To me, great weight should have been given to the evidence of those operating in country, such as the third-party organisation—if evidence was taken from them—because they would have been among the few people aware of exactly what was happening on the ground.

Professor de Jong: As we have emphasised, some of the conclusions about how the Afghan Government would have already had the data simply do not apply to all the different cohorts. The other thing is that Rimmer interviewed a couple of individuals who were aware of the data breach at the time, but he also interviewed experts who were not in the know, so to speak, so the value of that evidence is slightly questionable, because they did not have the full details and would have made general statements about the security situation in Afghanistan without knowing some pretty essential data. The timing of the Rimmer report is difficult to comprehend—you sketched out the timeline.

It is always easier to say that there is a diminished threat level when some people have been resettled. For example, when it comes to interpreters, there was a resettlement programme that was very slow and not perfect, but at the time many interpreters had come to the UK or to other countries, so of course we would see fewer killings, because they were simply not in the country any more. When it comes to the Triples and others, however, we see the threat.

Rafi Hottak: The reports do help to understand some of what is happening in Afghanistan, but risk and danger are something personal to people. To judge how endangered someone feels, or the view of the

interpreters or the Triples already here in the UK about their families facing the risk in Afghanistan, that should also be taken into consideration.

In most of the reports, none of the interpreters, the Triples units or the NDS had been interviewed, or their view had not been taken into account. In particular, those in Afghanistan were totally disregarded. Reports were published about people and the risks and dangers they faced, but no one spoke to them, so the reports lack vital information that is needed for the continuation of these schemes to save the lives of people who are very vulnerable.

Professor de Jong: This is really important. If we remind ourselves that, when it comes to refugee law, we say that people have to establish a well-founded fear of persecution, it is pretty clear that that bar would be met by many people in these situations. Many people live a life where they have survived, but they do not really live a life anymore; they experience a kind of social death, where they live away from their families and are moving all the time. Are we putting the evidential bar so high that we are saying, "Bring your dead body"? That is literally the sentiment that many people we speak to feel: "Do you want me to bring my dead body to you before you will accept me into the UK?"

Rafi Hottak: I will give you an example. In one of the instances where an interpreter applied for his family—his father, mother and sister—he was asked to provide a number of pieces of evidence for how the family is dependent on him. He provided financial dependency evidence, but the rejection letter stated that "because you can support your family" and because they could safely obtain that money, he could continue to support them and there was no need for them to come here. Literally, if I provide the evidence, you reject me, and if I do not provide the evidence, you reject me—it is shambolic.

Q205 **Emma Lewell:** I do not want to paraphrase what all three of you have said, but am I being fair in saying that you all agree that the Rimmer review does not give the full picture and is incomplete?

David Williams: Absolutely.

Professor de Jong: Yes.

Rafi Hottak: Absolutely.

Q206 **Emma Lewell:** Do you get the impression that it was rushed as well?

David Williams: There has been the suggestion that it was rushed, and that it was influenced perhaps by the decision to close all the schemes.

Q207 **Emma Lewell:** Do you have any understanding of why such a review was not carried out sooner, or throughout?

Professor de Jong: That is an excellent question.

David Williams: No. We asked along the way whether there were reviews being carried out, but obviously, because of the super-injunction, it was very difficult to give the reasons why.

Emma Lewell: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Q208 **Mr Bailey:** I want to jump straight back to you, David. You said that the pace of the Rimmer review was influenced by the decision to close the scheme. Do you feel there was undue influence on the review itself?

David Williams: Certainly that has been the suggestion of some of those we have spoken to, but I do not have evidence of that. Some of those we speak to, both currently involved in Afghanistan and involved in our political teams, think that that is the case.

Rafi Hottak: I believe that, because the Rimmer report was used in a way to shut down the legal schemes. I will just add that that could lead to illegal immigration by those affected, because they want safety, so they will want to come out of Afghanistan.

The Rimmer report was used, I guess, as a political stunt to shut down the legal avenues that were set up for Afghans to leave if they felt endangered—particularly the allies: interpreters, Triples and others. It was incomplete, I believe, because affected people were not among the report's interviewees.

Q209 **Mr Bailey:** It also—if I might ask you to pull on that a bit more—misses a significant cohort.

Professor de Jong: Yes, it misses a significant cohort. Again, there could have been confidential communication with people who were affected, who could have been asked what the effect had been. That would have been an excellent evidence-gathering exercise.

Q210 **Mr Bailey:** Do you think the UK has "honoured our obligation and commitment that we set out to repay when the scheme was first introduced"?

Rafi Hottak: As an Afghan, I appreciate the support provided so far to the Afghan allies—the interpreters, Triples and many others whose lives have been saved. Let me put it on the record that I thank the UK Government for that. However, it does not reach all our direct employees: people who stood by the UK Government in the past 20 years of the war against terror. That includes interpreters, the Triples and other LECs who were direct employees of the UK Government, and today they are left behind at the mercy of the Taliban.

Professor de Jong: To echo Rafi, in every interview I would conduct with Afghan interpreters in the UK they would always thank the UK Government. As the Sulha Alliance, we are really keen to put out positive stories, because the community has been hugely successful in integrating in the UK and building new lives. Their wives and children have set up new lives; they have won awards and set up businesses. As you know, it is incredibly important for the veteran community to know that some of the

people they worked alongside are now finally in the UK. In that sense, of course, some of the promises have been fulfilled—but not all.

The closure of the schemes was very sudden, without any notice. There was no, "Get your application in by next week, because then we will close it." Of course, some doubt was cast on the timing of that closure when, a week or two later, the super-injunction was lifted, causing a lot of concern.

Simultaneously, the AFM route—the route to apply for additional family members—was closed and, again, people did not have full knowledge. If they had had full knowledge of the data breach before the closure, it would have been more acceptable, but they did not get that information. Finally, of course, this was not the first data breach; it was just the most serious. When it comes to a promise that "We will protect you", that goes beyond resettlement. Interpreters do not feel particularly respected in the way that their data and the communication with them has been handled.

Q211 **Mr Bailey:** David, what do you think of that statement? It was the Minister for the Armed Forces who said that, by the way.

David Williams: An interpreter who has waited almost three years for a decision on his mother and brother, both of whom have been beaten and tortured, sent me a message the other day. He asked for an update, and I was unable to give him one. He replied with the Boris Johnson "heaven and earth" line and a laughing emoji.

Q212 **Mr Bailey:** That being the case, was the Government justified in its decision to close the resettlement scheme to new applications in July?

Rafi Hottak: I believe the ARAP scheme should have been kept open for as long as there was any doubt that we might have even one person left behind. I have a Triples officer who is from Nuristan, and he does not have access to the internet. He lives in a remote area and is keeping a low profile. For him, these deadlines do not mean anything. He is waiting for the UK Government to make the right decision and save his life. Whenever he gets a chance, he asks me what is happening with his application. In the past six months, he has only contacted me twice. My only answer is, "You need to keep checking your email, because you will receive the response." He does not have a smartphone or access to the internet, so when will he know?

I am aware of situations in which people have disappeared. I do not know whether they have been found and have already been evacuated, but hopefully the people who have disappeared are alive. They might be somewhere with the Taliban, and there are also cases where Afghans were picked up by the ISI in Pakistan. I do not know whether those people will be released alive or killed, but let us say that they pop up alive next year and the ARAP scheme is closed; how will we help them? Simply because the UK Government is taking a political stand and shutting down all the legal avenues, what option will that person have?

The same goes for the interpreters. Their families are still there, and they are the most vulnerable people: sisters, mothers and other family

members, who are relying on them emotionally or financially, and caring for them. Whether it is interpreters, Triples or the Afghans in general, their elderly parents live with them in the same houses. In most cases the interpreters and the Triples have been evacuated, but their elderly mum and dad are left behind. They need care and support from the individual who is already here in the UK. Their AFM application is still pending and, in most cases, they are rejected. I think what the UK Government did was a political action rather than a moral stand to support our allies.

Professor de Jong: This really means that the additional family member scheme should also have remained open. It is now only open for those who get acceptance and indicate within 30 days that they might need to bring additional family members.

As Rafi has indicated, the irony is that if you apply for additional family members to come, you need to prove that they are at risk because of their association with you, or prove extreme vulnerability and dependence on you, for instance if somebody is very severely ill. Because people did not know about the data breach, they would not have been able to put forward the evidence that somebody is at risk because of association with them.

The suggestion has been made informally that if you had an AFM application pending, or one that was rejected, you could probably ask for a review stating that your data was breached and that you now want them to review it. But if you had not made the application, you cannot make that application anymore, and there has been no explicit, open advice to people that they could ask for a review on the basis of the data breach.

Rafi has given some very good examples of how people in Afghanistan are affected, but unfortunately, with what is happening in the US at the moment, people there are affected as well. You well know that the NATO mission was international and collaborative, but when it came to resettlement nothing was co-ordinated or harmonised. If you were unlucky enough to be an interpreter at Regional Command South in Kandahar, you worked for the Dutch, the Canadians and the UK, maybe via an American subcontractor—that is a real example. Those people had all countries looking the other way.

Someone who worked with a major general that I know quite well in the UK eventually made it on to an evacuation plane to the US, and he took it. Now he is sending the Sulha Alliance messages stating that, of course, under Trump's current regime, not having a green card, he does not know what will happen to his family. Normally, I would have immediately advised him to apply for ARAP because he should be eligible—he worked as an interpreter for British forces—but I can no longer give that advice.

David Williams: Also to endorse what Rafi was saying, we have to remember that a lot of the interpreters and others—Triples in particular—destroyed their telephones and changed their email addresses and telephone numbers, so their line of communication is very limited. They

lost touch with the MoD. When they put in their new applications, or try to follow up on their old applications, they get rejected.

Q213 **Ian Roome:** I want to talk about resettlement. For the record, since Operation Pitking we have had the ARAP scheme, the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and the Afghanistan response route, all brought together into the Afghan resettlement programme in December 2024. Obviously, that has been closed since July. From the Afghan perspective, how has the UK Government approach to resettlement changed in the four years since the end of Operation Pitking?

Rafi Hottak: These different schemes are not in theory a big concern for an Afghan. As long as I am approved and my family is saved, I do not care if you bring me out under the ARAP, the ACRS or the ARR. The same goes for every other Afghan. But when these schemes are used as a grey area to reject cases—you do not come under the ARAP, so you are rejected; you do not come under the ACRS, so you are rejected; you do not come under the ARR, so you are rejected—what option do they have? That is where people who are at risk are left at risk without any support.

If I understand your question, it is about whether changing the schemes has any impact on their perception in Afghanistan. I do not believe that it does, because they do not understand the different schemes and the details behind them. As long as they are approved, they will appreciate the UK Government for that support, but if you are rejecting them, regardless of what name you give the scheme, it will cause anger and betrayal for them.

Professor de Jong: One important change that we did not mention when we talked about the closure of the scheme is that the ACRS was also closed, but Rimmer does not at all go into the risk to people who should be relocated under ACRS, for instance women's rights activists. It is abundantly clear that in Afghanistan at the moment their rights are seriously violated, so it needs to be noted that the scheme initially had a target of 20,000 and the Government closed it down, without any clear reason, even though the target had not been met by far.

When it comes to resettlement and the ways that people have been supported in the UK, we see some important changes, some of which are quite negative. First, we talked about people being held in Pakistan for extended periods of time. That includes people being held there for two years, during which time their children do not have any access to education.

We now see that even those people who have been held in Pakistan for a long time are brought to military bases—to barracks—where, again, there is no infrastructure and no way for them to start their lives. The impact of that is very different for those who have come more recently compared with those who came under Op Pitking and were brought to hotels.

All in all, even though resettlement has been really successful for some cases, I think it is fair to say that it is pretty much a postcode lottery

whether you are resettled in the north of Scotland without the kind of support and infrastructure that you may need, or in a community that has been better set up and perhaps has more experience of refugee resettlement or is very welcoming. It is really dependent on where you end up.

We also see a reduction in the kind of support that is being offered. Initially, people could have some say over where they would be resettled, but that is no longer the case. One of the interpreters who we support arrived in a Leeds hotel this summer after an extended wait in Pakistan. His kids in Leeds do not go to school, and he just has to wait there until he finally gets told where he is being moved. He does not have any say any more about where he is going.

We have unlucky individuals who were independent enough to find their own accommodation, but the irony is that they do not get a caseworker and there is no local authority support for them. People who are independent enough to source their own accommodation are not rewarded for that, and they fall out of the system. That is something where civil society has to pick up the pieces.

Q214 Ian Roome: David, you have been working in resettlement and with Afghans for a long time. How have you found the UK Government's approach to resettlement since the data breach?

David Williams: To go back to what Sara was saying, one tangible difference is that in the early days, those coming to the country had three options on accommodation and they were able to turn down accommodation because they wanted to move nearer to their families. That has ended, and that has impacted quite a lot of people. There is one instance of somebody who has family in Inverness, but they are still in Crawley. They would like an option to move closer, but that does not exist.

Q215 Ian Roome: We are talking about the experience of somebody being resettled. I have experience of that, because I have members on the ARAP scheme in my constituency. How do you feel that the Government has handled resettlement into some of the communities across the United Kingdom, in respect of some of the written evidence you have given previously around a lack of infrastructure and deskilling?

People have had to de-skill because there are no jobs in the community in which they have been placed, yet they are in contact with friends in Afghanistan who were in the same profession as them but have been able to carry the profession on because they are in a big city with more opportunities than a rural, isolated constituency. What is your experience of that?

Professor de Jong: Rafi can say this as well: the Afghans interpreters were also somewhat the elite of the country—they spoke English and were often quite well-educated, so the deskilling has hit them really hard. They want to work, which is why they often end up like the community of people who we represent and advocate for. They may end up as Uber drivers. We have exceptional individuals like Rafi, who was an accountant,

and we have many others who are supporting the resettlement of newer arrivals. But, indeed, they are often placed in places where they do not have any chance to rebuild their lives.

As you may know, the big military charities got a contract to support the resettlement—The Royal British Legion and Forces Employment—but that support was painfully slow. I do not know if you are aware of this, but they got the contracts and were supposed to offer support to people with a defence connection—that was the term. Interestingly, it was not sufficient for an individual to go to those organisations directly and say, “I have a defence connection,” which is ironic, because that is really easy to prove, especially if you are an interpreter, as the UK has the P-file and the LSU number.

It was also not possible for charities like the Sulha Alliance, which are long-established and known to the Government, to refer people directly to the Royal British Legion to get support. There were situations where people would be contacted one and a half years after they had resettled to the UK with the offer to help with furniture. That would have been really useful 14 months earlier; not so much now.

Even RBL and Forces Employment themselves have said that they felt their hands were tied, because they had to wait for a separate pipeline for the MoD to say, “This individual has a defence connection and you can support them”. That could have again been very easily streamlined, because these people were already approved. Their defence connection was approved as part of the ARAP process. They could have received that help the next day, but that was not the case unfortunately.

Q216 Ian Roome: How do you think the Government could improve the resettlement process? I hear from you, even today, the frustration around the application process and the length of time. What is your understanding of the reasons for those delays?

Rafi Hottak: To go back to what Sara was saying, we had professional people who were evacuated—there were interpreters, doctors, engineers. In many cases, mismanagement has happened. The UK Government have not taken a lead where this potential was used properly. They are working in low-paid jobs. The lucky ones are now taxi drivers. Others are doing literally cash-in-hand jobs.⁹

With the integration with the community, the Government have acted very poorly. As David and Sara said, some support had options, so some support that was provided was better than others. Those who found accommodation themselves after a year or two staying in a hotel—they were fed up and going through mental health issues as well with the family—were not rewarded with the same sort of support. If the MoD moved you to a house, for two years the rent would be paid. If you find your own accommodation in an area close to someone you know, who can

⁹ Note from witness: By this, I meant short-term, temporary work.

provide you with some emotional support or help you to find a good job and so forth, the Government have not taken any lead into it. That could have been dealt with much better.

The Afghan forces who were used here, particularly the SF units, the Triples units, were trained by the best of the best of the UK forces. As we have Gurka units, we could have established an Afghan unit. Either in the near future or a few years down the line, we will be going back to Afghanistan; eventually the situations that we see will lead to that. These Afghans were our asset and we could have used them then. I see they were left on their own, their potential was wasted, and the support which was provided was lacking in many ways.

This change was difficult and huge for the Afghans as well. They came from established, professional lives. They had everything in their country and suddenly everything was gone. They are moved to a country that is culturally different to them. In many cases, they were put in remote areas where there were one or two families, and they were far apart from one another, even those Afghans who knew each other.

I made a suggestion in the initial days: "Why not involve the communities? The Government should provide them some sort of guarantee that if they find their own tenancy, the Government will guarantee it, provide some sort of letter, and the landlord can give them those properties. Or, if there are 70 families in a hotel and there is a bunch of 10 houses—it doesn't even matter if they are in a remote area—give those 70 families the choice of which 10 of you want to live together in that area and those houses." The Government could have done this integration to the UK much more smoothly, and equally to all across the schemes. I think it was lacking in many ways.

Professor de Jong: The timeframe question is really pertinent. It is interesting that the onus is always on Afghans to apply or get their review in by a certain date. The Government did not fulfil very tight timeframes themselves, and that has led to people being in limbo, whether in Pakistan or a military barracks. That does not allow people to rebuild their lives, and it wastes lives away, as Rafi said. Many people in the community have very severe mental health issues, because, unlike a British soldier, who would go on a tour of duty for six months, if you were a Triple or an interpreter, you would have worked for much longer, so the exposure to trauma and violence would have been much longer.

Again, there is a postcode lottery here, because as you will know, NHS England's Op COURAGE, which opened its door to Afghans, does not exist in the Scottish system. We deal with people who are so traumatised that they have to take certain medication, which now means that they cannot work as taxi drivers. They cannot sleep, and their family cannot sleep because they scream at night. These are very seriously psychologically injured people, who may have to make impossible decisions, such as, "Do I move closer to my family in Scotland so that my wife can sometimes get a day off from managing this very challenging situation, or do I stay in

England, where I have the medical access to Op COURAGE offered by NHS England?"

The medium and long-term cost to British society because of the wasted lives is really significant. We still talk about the impact that covid has had on the disruption of children's education. We talk a lot about how the Taliban denies girls education. As David said, if we make a decision not to move people, and to let them languish in Afghanistan, that means you take years of girls' education away. When they finally come to the UK, however ambitious and smart they are—we have amazing examples of that—they will always have a hard time integrating, having been out of the system. We will only see the result of that in a few years, so it really is short termism.

Q217 Ian Roome: Our evidence shows that in the early days, the support for people resettling into the United Kingdom was poor, or even non-existent. Would you say that is still the case, or do you think the Government have got better at helping to provide support from the early days, when people have arrived?

Rafi Hottak: Those who have been settled in the last four years have been moved from the initial MoD support to universal credit—council support. Initially, some of them were moved into high-rent accommodation, where rents were anything from £1,800 to £3,000, while the support they received from universal credit was much lower than that initial contracted rent.

There have been cases where people are coming to me saying, "What do I do now? I am left with literally no money to feed my family." In one instance, the guy came to me and opened his universal credit, and I saw that he was left with £270. That is a family of eight people—six children and a wife and husband. What should he do with that £270—pay for his electricity or food? Literally, you cannot live on that amount. The initial contracts done by the MoD or Home Office—or whoever did those contracts, because third parties were involved—are impacting their life now. Some are left with homelessness. Some have no option but to make themselves homeless and move into council-provided hotels, which is another problem for everybody.

The support for trying to put them into jobs has been very poor. I appreciate that it was sudden, with thousands of people moved here, and councils were not ready, but given that four years have passed, the Government should have taken active steps to settle them properly and help to put them into jobs and resolve these other issues.

Ian Roome: Professor, how is your organisation supporting the Afghans in the resettlement process? I ask that question because I have been asked to provide references for Afghans who have come over on the ARAP scheme, who apply for jobs but need references. Who gives them the reference?

Professor de Jong: Me sometimes as well.

Q218 **Ian Roome:** I am hearing about failures in the Government process where they have not thought the schemes all the way through. It would be interesting to see what your thoughts are on the practical support to get people into work.

Professor de Jong: That is an excellent point. As I said, the official support that should have been there through some of the big military charities was unfortunately not agile enough to really provide support. I co-founded the Sulha Alliance with three veterans. There are now three of us—one of them has stepped down—but we are still volunteers.

We were lucky enough to get a grant, which allowed us to employ a former Triple, an Afghan interpreter, as a community officer, and now to also employ part timer, for one day a week, two women's officers. They are the wives of former Afghan interpreters who themselves also got evacuated under Op Pitting. They are incredible women who themselves ran an independent NGO in Afghanistan and who speak excellent English. Some of the things that they do indicate the pieces that are left. One of them is currently holding English language classes for Afghan women who are also illiterate in their own language. It is very challenging for them to go to ESOL classes where the teacher speaks English. They really need a teacher who speaks Dari and Pashto, as our women's officer does.

We have another woman officer who is now offering the driving theory exam to women. There is a lot of burden on Afghan men to be the breadwinner, the organiser. That often means they have to do the school run and earn the money, and so on, especially when they live in isolated places. She works for us and does that work, and also picks up on the issues around mental health.

One of the jobs that a lot of people who have worked in the security sector want to go into in the UK is the security sector, but that is the one thing where you have to go through a pretty rigorous vetting process. So I often write the references, and I get phone calls about whether I can vouch for an individual. If they have not been in the country for five years, they cannot have a regular DBS check here. That kind of stuff is not provided for. As I said, the Sulha Alliance is still doing it voluntarily, apart from our Afghans who we pay, which is also a way to provide them with a job.

David Williams: One of the things we do within the alliance is trace former officers and mentors and ask them to provide a reference, and that has worked quite well. It takes a lot of work from our end, and it is particularly difficult if the officer is still serving, but on the whole, they have been incredibly supportive, particularly of the interpreters.

Professor de Jong: The final thing to say is that even very established services from different local authorities often do not quite know what to do with Afghan clients. That is very common. I have a full-time job at the university, but I am the person who mans the email inbox. It is very common for me to get emails from the Department for Work and Pensions saying, "I have an Afghan client here. Can you help?"

It is quite funny, given that we are a bunch of volunteers who improvise this. But that is extremely common. We have a specific remit for Afghan interpreters, their families and other locally employed civilians, but we would still go out of our way to provide support for others who are in real need. It is really important to indicate that the pieces are picked up by volunteers. Person A is an excellent example as well.

David Williams: We do need to speed up the movement and speed up decision making. It is quite chilling to think that the projected final movements of those relocated will be in 2029. We are asking people to wait eight years after Pitting until they are brought here.

Professor de Jong: Come August 2026—it will have been five years by that point—all of us would like to finish the mission, and would like the UK Government to finish the mission.

Q219 **Ian Roome:** On that point, what is the longest time between people applying and hearing that any decision has been made?

Rafi Hottak: There were interpreters who did not qualify for any of the previous schemes, even with Operation Pitting. One of them made a video appeal to the UK Government, which I published on my Twitter account; I sent it to Sara and David as well. Luckily, he is here in the UK now. I do not think I can mention his name.

This person's case was rejected without any logical reason. The first people arrived in the UK in 2014. In the past 11 years—between 2014 and 2025—his case was rejected throughout all these schemes. Finally, with support from Sara, David and one of our lawyer team, eventually he succeeded and is here in the UK now. That is one example; there are many others that I could give.

David Williams: There was another example of an interpreter who the MoD said was terminated. It took us three years to prove that he was not terminated, and then he was eventually brought over here. But during that period, his family suffered dreadfully. They were attacked, threatened and their home was raided.

Professor de Jong: We often try to get this data, and we do that sometimes with the help of friendly MPs putting in written questions, where we ask things like, "How many people have been waiting for over one year for a decision on their AFM applications? How many people have been waiting for more than six months in hotels in Pakistan?" These are some of the written questions currently out there that we have asked in the past. Quite often, the Government have to admit that several people have been waiting for more than one year; on AFM, it can be longer than that.

Q220 **Michelle Scrogam:** We touched a little bit on accommodation, but our evidence suggests that finding suitable accommodation for Afghans who have been resettled is one of the most difficult things to do. Why is that?

David Williams: One of the problems is the shortage. But these are large families, which obviously increases the capacity of rooms and that side of things. There is a genuine shortage of accommodation; they are having to go to the private sector. In the early days, the perception clearly was that ACRS was more generous and had better accommodation than the ARAP side of things. Those who the British Council worked with who were relocated all ended up with extremely good accommodation in the west country, whereas the interpreters and others who came out on the same planes were put in military camps and, in one instance, they have moved three times.

Rafi Hottak: I think that now the Afghans understand that the UK does not have large houses that can accommodate families with 10, 12 or 15 members, they have to accept a property with one room less than they are entitled to. In most cases I found out that, because the Government have rules that X number of rooms should be provided, that is also causing problems; the Afghans are happy to accept one room less, but because UK rules do not allow it, that is maybe why they have not been offered those properties.

As David rightly said, there is a shortage. In some cases, the Afghans also want to move to certain areas—not the houses they have been offered. There is a wide range of factors playing into that.

Professor de Jong: On a positive note, we have regional representatives for Afghan interpreters who represent certain regions in our community. This perhaps also indicates how difficult it is to streamline grassroots efforts with more official efforts: Our community officer is based in Wales, and we have another very good contact based in Scotland. Both of them would be quite keen to go into the hotels in Crawley and do an information session for the Afghans who have more recently arrived about what it means to live in Scotland or Wales. That could take away some of the concerns or fears that people have because they will have heard about only England and not those other places. We now have some established communities in those places, but it is not easy, even for a charity as established as ours, to get access to a hotel to offer an information session like that.

David Williams: There is also a frustration when those arriving now or in the last few months see the accommodation that was available four years ago, or even earlier, for the ex-gratia people. They ask, "Why not us?" It is easy to explain, but they risked their lives in the same way and they think they should be entitled to that kind of accommodation. Many of them are incredibly grateful to the ARAP scheme and to the people who have supported them, and they are prepared to wait because of that. They are safe and they recognise the debt they owe to those who have helped them and to the country.

Q221 **Michelle Scrogam:** Rafi, in your evidence you say that the use of bridging hotels during the earlier years of resettlement was "costly, corrosive, and avoidable." Could you say more about the issues that has caused?

Rafi Hottak: First, it has caused mental health problems among the people who lived in hotels. Afghans were not used to it, and they were provided with one or two rooms with limited movement. Particularly in the covid period, they couldn't go out and staying in the one room allocated to them affected their mental health. Staying in those hotels for a prolonged period of a year or two has taken away their hope of integrating into society as soon as possible and finding a job.

People were put into hotels for two years, doing literally nothing and just waiting for appropriate accommodation, and then the locations offered were not acceptable to them. Many of them had made friends in that time period who were sent to a different location from them. So first, it has affected their mental health, and secondly, it has made integration difficult for those families. They lost their country and now they are losing their friends here, and it has taken a toll on them.

David Williams: Inevitably, there was tension in the hotels between different families, and that became a problem. There was an instance of a Hazara interpreter being picked on by others, and his family suffered dreadfully. He asked to be moved and he was not, because there was no other suitable accommodation. There were tensions in the hotels, for example, in Russell Square, where the children played in the corridors. Because they were not allowed out, they were hammering on doors and running up and down the corridors. That is fine for a limited period of time, but it took its toll as the months wore on.

Q222 **Michelle Scrogam:** How do you see the more recent politicisation of using the hotels? What impact is that having on the families who are there and the schemes?

Rafi Hottak: Because of the recent political situation, the UK public at large are not differentiating between the illegal immigrants who come by boat and those who are resettled here through these schemes. That is because of miscommunication from the Government side to the public. They do not understand that these were the people who stood by us and supported the UK Government in Afghanistan in the UK missions, so the UK Government owes them a duty of care and has a moral obligation.

I understand that the asylum route is a vital route for many people who feel prosecuted and endangered in their country. I do not believe that the asylum seekers are any less human or that their cases should be any less important than the scheme ones, as I myself was one of the illegal ones. I came here by boat and claimed asylum. Over the past 14 or 15 years, I have been running this campaign to save the lives of all those allies.

There is a misunderstanding of this whole situation. That is why these hotels have become a focal point in the political arena and have been used for political gains and losses.

Professor de Jong: You may recall maybe one-and-a-half years ago when any movement from Pakistan to the UK completely stopped for many months. People had the very strong impression that this was

because there was so much media attention on the UK hotels that it was more convenient to keep people longer in Pakistan's hotels, which was of course also cheaper. If we just look at the media, only the BBC had a local correspondent in Islamabad. They were kind of out of sight, out of mind. It was unbelievable that people could just be left waiting there in Pakistan, where they had very limited movement.

We also see reports in our community of hate crimes, against Afghan interpreters as well as their wives and children, from the kind of more low-level bullying in school—some of us from our team go in to educate in schools—to women who wear the hijab who are being spat at and being called names and being followed, to men who also face physical violence.

Unfortunately, the way things are moving in public discourse is that Muslim men are often singled out as the perpetrators of violence, but Afghan interpreters were victims of violence in Afghanistan during their work—as Rafi already indicated in relation to his own injuries, physical as well as mental and moral. That also unfortunately continues in the UK.

Q223 Michelle Scrogam: To David in particular, what are your thoughts on the way the media handles these types of stories, and the responsibility that it takes for actions going forward?

David Williams: Obviously, it varies across the papers, but in terms of the interpreters and the Afghan veterans, they have received a pretty positive press, and the relocations have been supported on the whole.

There are some who don't seem to differentiate between those who arrive in boats and those who have come as part of legitimate schemes, but that is the exception.

Q224 Michelle Scrogam: Do you think that there is more that could be done on the back of acknowledging that there doesn't seem to be a differentiation? Should there be that differentiation?

David Williams: I think more could be done—that is a personal opinion. I think we need to acknowledge entirely the fact that the people who we are working with come as part of a Government-sponsored relocation scheme, and there is a difference.

Having said that, obviously, as Rafi rightly says, there is a great need for support for those arriving in the boats and elsewhere. Rafi's case is interesting because, when he arrived—there were no schemes in existence at that time, and his family was being threatened—he was initially rejected by the Government. It was only on appeal that that was overturned. I first met Rafi in Afghanistan in 2009, and it was ridiculous; one of the points the Government were making was that they could not prove that he had worked for the British military. Actually, an officer died beside him when he was blown up, and his life was saved by doctors at Bastion hospital.

Professor de Jong: Also, really importantly, the onus is on not just the media but the Government to change the messaging; saying, "I closed the

scheme, and with that I have saved taxpayers money," implicitly says, "Afghans are costly."

I am not saying that my country, the Netherlands, did everything right, but one thing it did right was that the Ministry of Defence organised not a medal but a commemorative coin. They had official ceremonies where the Minister of Defence, in person, would hand this commemorative coin to every individual Afghan who had worked for them. In the UK, many of us have been trying to say, "Why could there not be a civilian medal for Afghans who have worked with the British Army?" We have never got anywhere, and we have raised this many times in different ways. I think that symbolic recognition would really make a difference.

Q225 Michelle Scrogham: Written evidence suggests that the nine-month limit on transitional accommodation could see families being put at risk of homelessness, and we heard about the contracts earlier. Is this something that you are seeing?

Rafi Hottak: I think I have already started seeing the impact of the nine months—I think the initial one was two years—so now it is coming to an end in most cases. People are already seeing the effect of that, which is hitting them hard financially. They cannot pay those rents by themselves, so it will lead to more homelessness. Councils should be supported in helping these individuals by either moving them into low-rent houses or providing them with some sort of council accommodation.

Chair: On behalf of the Committee, we are very grateful to you, Mr Hottak, Professor de Jong and Mr Williams. Thank you for taking your valuable time to inform our inquiry.